

2.5

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 349

PS 011 859

AUTHOR Downs, A. Chris: And Others
TITLE The Real-Pretend Distinction in Children's Judgments of Televised Events.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 11p.: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Southwestern Society for Research in Human Development (Lawrence, KS, March 27-29, 1980).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aggression: Childrens Television; Comprehension: *Perception: *Preschool Children; Prosocial Behavior: *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Judgment: *Reality: Televised Events

ABSTRACT

Preschoolers' perceptions of the reality of selected televised portrayals were investigated in this study. Three factors (type of event, character, and format) were examined as a function of the age and sex of the children. Thirty-six 4- and 5 1/2-year-olds were asked to judge the reality of specific televised events shown on videotape. The events depicted varied in aggressiveness, format (cartoon versus non-cartoon) and type of character (humorous or non-humorous). Responses were scored on the basis of children's judgments as to whether the portrayals were either real or pretend. While age and sex differences were absent, children's real-pretend judgments were found to be dependent on the format of the events observed. Cartoon events were viewed as fiction whereas non-cartoon events were generally seen as more real. Neither type of character nor type of event appeared to alter these perceptions. Implications for research on children's learning of televised aggression and prosocial behavior are discussed. (Author/MP)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED195349

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

The Real-Pretend Distinction in Children's Judgments of Televised Events

A. Chris Downs

University of Houston at Clear Lake City

Carol J. Rogne

and

Deidre Hiney-Langseth

Moorhead State University

Moorhead State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A. Chris Downs

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Running Head: Judgments of Televised Events

Footnote

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the biennial meeting of the Southwestern Society for Research in Human Development, Lawrence, Kansas, March, 1980. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance of the children and teachers in the participating schools. Reprint requests should be directed to A. Chris Downs, Program in Human Sciences, University of Houston at Clear Lake City, 2700 Bay Area Blvd., Houston, Texas 77058.

PS011859

Abstract

Previous research suggests that children's understanding that television is fictional may be dependent on various factors inherent in televised events. Thirty-six 4- and 5½-year-olds were asked to judge the reality of specific televised events shown via videotape. The events varied in aggressiveness, format and type of character shown. While age and sex differences were absent, children's judgments were dependent on the format of the televised events (cartoon vs. non-cartoon) rather than other variables. Implications for research on children's learning of televised aggression and prosocial behaviors are discussed.

The Real/Pretend Distinction in Children's Judgments of Televised Events

A considerable amount of research has been directed at the impact of television on children. Salient areas of concern have been children's acquisition of aggressive (e.g. Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Stein & Friedrich, 1975) and prosocial behaviors (e.g. Coates, Pusser & Goodman, 1976), as well as children's overall attention to and comprehension of televised portrayals (e.g. Anderson, Alwitt, Lorch & Levin, in press; Collins, 1975). In contrast, only limited emphasis has been placed on children's tendencies to interpret televised events as real or pretend. The ability to differentiate real from pretend events most likely influences both the amount and type of information acquired by children. Indeed, numerous researchers have argued that children's perceptions of events as real enhance the probability of attending to and learning from the observed events (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Horton & Wohl, 1956; von Feilitzen, 1976).

Little consensus exists among previous investigations concerned with children's perceptions of televised stimuli as real or pretend. Lyle and Hoffman (1972) interviewed first, sixth and tenth graders to determine their overall understanding of television programming. They discovered that while recognition of television as fantasy increased with age, even a majority of tenth graders viewed televised portrayals as real. Similarly, von Feilitzen (1976) found that Swedish preschoolers judged television programs as generally accurate representations of social reality. In contrast, Aggermaes and Haugstad (1976) found a marked increase in preschoolers' overall comprehension that television is pretend by age four.

Lack of consistency across previous findings lends support to the hypothesis that children's recognition of televised events as fictional is a

complex and gradual developmental process (e.g. Hawkins, 1977). Indeed, it seems highly likely that real-pretend judgments are dependent on several factors inherent in the events themselves such as type of event (aggressive or non-aggressive), type of character shown (human or non-human) and format of the event (cartoon or non-cartoon). For example, several researchers (e.g. Osborn & Endsley, 1971; Surheck, 1975) have found increased physiological responding and reported "scariness" among preschoolers as a function of aggression shown on televised portrayals. While these data do not directly support the contention that televised aggression is judged as more real by children, they do point out differential reactivity to aggression which might be related to perceptions of the events as more real.

We examined preschoolers' perceptions of the reality of selected televised portrayals in light of the three factors mentioned above (type of event, character, format). Further, we investigated these judgments as a function of the age and sex of children. Preschoolers were selected for study since Piaget (1935/1971) suggests that distinctions between real and fictional stimuli are acquired slowly, but progressively throughout the preoperational period.

Subjects were 18, 4-year-olds (9 boys, M age = 49.3 mos., range 42-57; 9 girls, M age = 50.5 mos., range = 38-57) and 18, 5½-year-olds (9 boys, M age = 64.7 mos., range = 58-71; 9 girls, M age = 67.0 mos., range = 58-73). All children were white, from middle-income homes, and were recruited through a private preschool in Fargo, North Dakota. While IQ information was unavailable, teachers' judgments suggested that all children were of average intelligence levels.

Two minute videotape selections were taken from each of the following

children's programs: "Sylvester and Bird" (cartoon with non-humans, or C/NH), "The Flintstones" (cartoon with humans, or C/H) and "The Brady Bunch" (non-cartoon with humans, or NC/H).¹ Each selection contained both mildly aggressive and non-aggressive actions as well as prominent central characters exhibiting the actions. Characters across selections were matched as closely as possible for type and salience of actions, music/noise accompanying actions, and presence of other characters. All selections were shown on a 24-in. color videotape monitor.

Children individually viewed selections in an unused preschool room and order of selections was randomized across children. After viewing each selection, the female experimenter asked children four questions (randomized for order of presentation) concerning whether specific events were real or pretend. One of the four questions for each selection concerned a mildly aggressive act.² Responses were scored on the basis of children's judgments as either real (1) or pretend (2).

Chi-square analyses produced no significant differences as a function of age or sex on any of the individual questions for any of the selections. However, subsequent tests for differences between overall proportions of children making real verses pretend judgments yielded numerous significant differences for specific questions. Namely, each of the events viewed in the C/NH and C/H selections were more likely to be judged as fictional rather than real (range of z s = 1.97-4.30, all p s $< .05$). In contrast, on the NC/H selection, children's judgments seemed somewhat dependent on the specific event. Children believed that when one of the characters in the NC/H selection cried that she was only pretending to cry ($z = 2.74$, $p < .05$). However, there were no significant differences in

the proportions of children judging each of the following as real verses pretend: the reality of a televised couple's marriage, whether or not the family shown was a real family, and the veracity of an injury incurred by one of the children (all z s = 1.70, ns).

Responses to questions within selections were then summed to yield overall real-pretend scores for each selection. These summed scores were entered into a 3 (Age) x 2 (Sex) x 3 (Selection) repeated measure ANOVA. The single significant effect was for Selection, $F(2,67) = 20.12$, $p < .0001$. Newman-Keuls analysis of the means for selections indicated that both the C/H ($M = 7.47$) and the C/NH ($M = 7.14$) selections were judged significantly ($p < .05$) more often as pretend than the NC/H selection ($M = 6.08$).

The results indicate that preschoolers' real-pretend judgments of televised portrayals are dependent on the format of the events observed. Cartoon events are viewed as fiction whereas non-cartoon events are generally seen as more real. Neither type of character nor type of event appeared to alter these perceptions.

These findings clarify previous research since other children who judged programs as real were watching non-cartoons (Lyle & Hoffman, 1972; von Feilitzen, 1976) while other preschoolers who judged programs as fictional were observing cartoons (Aggermaes & Haugstad, 1976). Overall, then, it appears that children as young as age four recognize that cartoon programming is "make believe", but continue to assume that non-cartoon programming is at least roughly similar to social reality well past the preschool years.

The implication of this finding appears to be salient. Specifically, in spite of cautions to the contrary (e.g. Stein & Friedrich, 1975), cartoons probably have less direct impact on children's learning than non-cartoon programs.

In fact, it would seem likely that non-cartoons play a much greater socializing role since children are more likely to accept these programs as real.

Additional research is necessary to extend children's real-pretend judgments to the acquisition and subsequent imitation of televised aggressive and prosocial behaviors. The mitigating role of these judgments in attention to and comprehension of programming warrants scrutiny as well. Finally, the eventual decline in judgments of television as real requires special consideration since it appears that non-cartoon television represents reality to children until such a decline occurs.

References

- Aggermaes, A., & Haugstad, R. Experienced reality in three- to six-year-old children: a study of direct reality testing. Child Psychology & Psychiatry, 1976, 17, 323-325.
- Anderson, D. R., Alwitt, L. F., Lorch, E. P., & Levin, S. R. Watching children watch television. In G. Hale & M. Lewis (Eds.), Attention and the development of cognitive skills, New York: Plenum, in press.
- Bandura, A. Social learning theory. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977
- Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. Imitation of film mediated aggressive models. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1963, 66, 3-11.
- Coates, R., Pusser, H. E., & Goodman, I. The influence of "Sesame Street" and "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" on children's social behavior in the preschool. Child Development, 1976, 47, 138-144.
- Collins, W. A. The developing child as viewer. Journal of Communications, 1975, 25, 35-44.
- Hawkins, R. The dimensional structure of children's perceptions of television reality. Communication Research, 1977, 4, 299-320.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. Mass communication and para-social interaction. Psychiatry, 1956, 19, 215-229.
- Lyle, J., & Hoffman, H. Children's use of television and other media. In E. A. Rubinstein, G. A. Comstock, & J. P. Murray (Eds.), Television and social behavior. Vol. 4. Television in day-to-day life: patterns of use. Washington, D. C.,: Government Printing Office, 1972.
- Osborn, D. K., & Endsley, R. C. Emotional reactions of young children to TV violence. Child Development, 1971, 42, 321-331.

- Piaget, J. Science of education and the psychology of the child. New York: Viking Press, 1971. (Originally published as Education et Instruction. In Encyclopedia Francaise, Vol. 15, Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1935).
- Stein, A. H., & Friedrich, L. K. Impact of television on children and youth. In E. M. Hetherington, (Ed.), Review of child development research, Vol. 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- Surbeck, E. Violence: the effects of children's perceptions of reality. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1975.
- von Feilitzen, C. The functions served by the media: report on a Swedish study. In R. Brown (Ed.), Children and television, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1976.

¹A program employing a non-cartoon format with non-human characters was not included for two reasons. First, such programs are extremely rare on television since humans are frequently cast into supporting roles (e.g. "Lassie"). Thus, use of such a program in the present study would yield little information concerning children's actual real-pretend judgments on programs they typically view. Second, inclusion of a fourth videotape selection would have lengthened the overall time children participated in the experimental session to over 20 minutes and consequently might have introduced a fatigue factor.

²To ensure children's comprehension of questions, each question was extensively piloted with a separate sample of children. The specific questions are available upon request from the first author.